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TENNYSON

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BY

FREDERIC HARRISON

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
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1899

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CHAPTER I

TENNYSON

Once only in the history of our literature in verse, and once in prose, has there been seen a royal suzerainty, maintained over an entire epoch by a single writer, to be compared to that by which Alfred Tennyson has dominated Victorian poetry. The supremacy held by Alexder Pope over his immediate contemporaries and that held by Samuel Johnson over his were as great and far more autocratic. But in the half-century that has passed since Tennyson became Poet Laureate, his authority over poetic form has been paramount, as his superiority to all poets of the time is above question or doubt. His flower, to adopt his words of proud humility, has truly 'worn a crown of light.' Most writers of verse can raise the flowers now. They sow it far and wide by every town and tower. All have the seed from Alfred Tennyson. But the cynic who should call it a weed would be flayed alive, as was Marsyas by Apollo. The people, the critics, the poets, with one voice continue to cry, 'Splendid is the flower!' And so say we all.

This royal prerogative enjoyed by Alfred Tennyson, in death as in life, has had some inconveniences, inherent in all royalties. It has placed him not only, as they say in French academies, *hors concours* — above competition, above criticism, above discussion — but almost above free judgment and honest understanding of his fine qualities and his true place in English poetry. No loyal subject

would presume to noise abroad a true and impartial estimate of the character and endowments of a reigning sovereign. And so, it has seemed to us all unmannerly, in the nineteenth century, to discuss the poems of Tennyson with the cool freedom that will certainly be applied to them in the next and succeeding centuries. He has never been judged as we judge Byron, Shelley, Keats, or Wordsworth. Since he won his just place as the poet of the Victorian era, he has not been treated as mere poet, or citizen of the immortal Republic of Letters. He has been, like 'Mr. Pope' or 'The Doctor,' invested with a conventional autocracy, and is spoken of in the language of homage, under pain of some form of *lèse-majesté*. It is far too early to anticipate the judgment of our successors on the place of Tennyson in English poetry. It is not to early too speak of him with freedom and honest admiration, disdaining any spurious loyalty and the whispered humbleness which royal personages expect. To continue this still would be false homage to our glorious literature and to one of the finest poets who adorn its roll.

As Homer was for all Greece *the poet*, so for the second half of the nineteenth century Tennyson has been 'the Poet' — his devotees spoke of him as 'the Bard' — holding a place quite analogous to that of Hugo in France; for he and Victor both 'darkened the wreaths of all who claimed to be their peers' in England as in France. No one denies that in England, as in France, there were men of genius who have written admirable verse. *Vixere fortes cum Agamemnone.* All men of sense feel the original genius of Robert Browning, his unique gift, his subtle power. All men of taste feel the magic of Swinburne's luscious music, his thrill of passion and scorn. One need not go through the list of the sixty-two so-called 'minor poets,' — 'some are pretty enough, and some are poor

indeed!' Yes! but the cool judgment brings us back to this, that though one or two men in these fifty years past have given us poems of resplendent genius, and some scores have written verses of extreme felicity and grace, and many hundreds of men and women have composed pieces 'pretty enough,' the prevalent perfume is always that of the Tennysonian flower; the lyre, whoever strikes it, gives forth the Tennysonian love-note of its own motion — *ἁ βάρβιτος δὲ χορδαῖς ἔρωτα μοῦνον ἀκεῖ* — and Alfred Tennyson holds an indisputable laureate crown as completely as ever did Victor Hugo in France.

The crown has been won, partly by the fact that Tennyson embalmed in exquisite verses the current tastes, creeds, hopes, and sympathies of the larger part of the reading public in our age, but mainly it was won by the supreme perfection of his form. In early life he formed a poetic style of his own, of quite faultless precision — musical, simple, and lucid. And in sixty years of poetic fecundity, his style may have gained in energy, but not in precision. It was never careless, never uncouth, never (or rarely) obscure. Every line was polished with the same unerring ear and the same infallible taste. In some sixty thousand lines it is rare to find a really false rhyme, a truly bungling verse, a crude confusion of epithets, or a vile cacophony — such ragged stuff as Byron flung off on almost every other page, such redundancies as Shelley or Keats would pour forth in some hour of delirious rapture, such rank commonplace as too often offend us in Wordsworth, even when he is not droning of malice prepense. Verses so uniformly harmonious as those of Tennyson, with their witchery of words, yet so clear, so pure, so tender, so redolent of what is beautiful in nature, in man, in woman — all this won over the entire public that cares for poetry, and it truly deserved to win it.

Even now full justice has hardly been done to Tennyson's supremacy in form; or rather, the general reader, much as he loves his poems, is not quite aware of the infallible mastery of language they possess. In the whole range of English poetry, Milton alone can be held to show an equal or even greater uniformity of polish. Perfection and continuity of polish are certainly not the same thing as the highest poetry, but they are the note of the consummate artist. English poetry, for all its splendid achievements, is not remarkable for uniform perfection of form, as compared with the best poetry of Greece, of Rome, and of Italy. Shakespeare himself (or perhaps it is his editors, his printers, or his pseudonyms) will at times break out into rant, and he is inordinately prone to indulge in conceits and quips. Nearly all our poets have their bad days — become careless, reckless, or prosy; lose complete self control; or commit some error of taste, be it in haste, in passion, or some morbid condition of the creative fancy. Gray always writes like the scholar and critic that he was, and Pope always writes with the neatness of a French 'wit.' But neither can uniformly avoid the commonplace, and thus they cannot claim the crown of absolute poetic form. Milton, if we can forgive the prolixity of his old age, never descends in his eagle's flight from the lofty perfection of form. And more than all other poets, Tennyson, if he never soars to such heights as Milton, maintains this wonderful equality of measured beat.

'IN MEMORIAM'

This unfaltering truth of form reaches its zenith in *In Memoriam*, which must always remain one of the triumphs of English poetry. It would be difficult to name any other poem of such length (some three thousand lines)

where the rhythm, phrasing, and articulation are so entirely faultless, so exquisitely clear, melodious, and sure. Subtle arguments of philosophy and problems of faith are treated with a grace equal to the ease and the lucidity of the expression. There is not a poor rhyme, not a forced phrase, not a loose or harsh line in the whole series. The rhymes, the assonances, the winged epithets are often of astonishing brilliancy, and yet they seem to flow unbidden from some native well-spring of poetic speech. Such ease, certainty, and harmony of tone imply consummate mastery of the poet's instrument; for not a stanza or a line looks as if it had cost the poet any labour at all, and yet every stanza and line looks as if no labour of his could ever make it more perfect. This is indeed a quality only to be found in our best poems, of which Milton has given us the immortal type. And though *In Memoriam* is far from being such glorious poetry as *Lycidas*, it shares with *Lycidas* itself consummate mastery of its own form of poetic language.

One of the main feats of this mastery of form is the extraordinarily beautiful and appropriate metre in which this poem is cast. Tennyson must be considered to have founded the typical metre for this meditative and elegiac lyric. Even if it had been occasionally used before in the seventeenth century, Tennyson gave it the development and perfection it has for us. It has become the natural mode for this reflective and mournful poetry; it is superior, no doubt, to the metre of Milton's *Il Penseroso*, or that of Marvell's *Thoughts in a Garden*, Byron's *Elegy on Thyrza*, or Coleridge's *Geneviève*. The ease, force, and music of this quatrain in Tennyson's hands are wonderful — the ease equalling the force, the music equalling the ease. As in all meditative poems on a single theme, we find stanzas which we could well spare. But the pieces which

are best known and have become household words, especially the first ten elegies with the famous *Introduction*, are masterpieces of exquisite versification, several of them may stand beside some of the happiest stanzas in our poetry. I always think of the opening stanza in No. ii. —

'Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
That name the under-lying dead,
Thy fibres net the dreamless head;
Thy roots are wrapt about the bones.' —

as being a miracle of poignant music and simple power. And what descriptive rhythm there is in the subtle alliterations and harmonies of the stanza —

'But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.'

What pathos and reticence in the last lines of No. vi. —

'To her, perpetual maidenhood,
And unto me, no second friend.'

And the tender address to the ship bearing his friend's body home in No. x.

English poetry again has few stanzas which for calm beauty can compare with —

''Tis well; 'tis something; we may stand
Where he in English earth is laid,
And from his ashes may be made
The violet of his native land.' (xviii.)

And the famous stanzas —

'When Lazarus left his charnel-cave.' (xxxi.)
'Oh yet we trust that somehow good.' (liv.)

and the other stanzas of this philosophic debate.

Or again the stanzas —

'I past beside the reverend walls
In which of old I wore the gown.' (lxxxvii.)

'You say, but with no touch of scorn.' (xcvi.)
'Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky.' (cvi.)

These are the household words — almost to us to-day the commonplaces of Tennyson. And the public is so far right that these, it may be hackneyed, lines are in grace, simplicity, and music amongst the best masterpieces of English lyric.

A question still remains. With all the charm and pathos of these stanzas, with all that unfailing workmanship surpassed perhaps by Milton alone, does *In Memoriam*, even in form, reach the topmost empyrean of lyric to which one or two of our poets have risen. Memory echoes back to our ear a passionate couplet, it may be, of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, a dazzling gem from *Lycidas*, another from Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, another from Wordsworth's *Ode on Immortality*.

Listen to this —

'Yet in these thoughts myself almost despairing
Haply I think on thee — and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate.'

Here is lyrical passion in all its delirium! —

'To me, fair Friend, you never can be old.'
'But thy eternal summer shall not fade.'
'When to the sessions of sweet silent thought,
I summon up remembrance of things past.'

All this rings in our ears like the momory of Beethoven's *Adelaïda*, sung by the great *tenore robusto*.

Or again, we think of Milton's *Nativity* —

> 'The trumpet spake not to the armèd throng;
> And kings sat still with awful eye.'

or we recall *Lycidas* —

> 'He must not float upon his watery bier
> Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
> Without the mead of some melodious tear.'

Does *In Memoriam*, with all its 'curious felicity' of phrase its perfect chiselling, its stately music in the minor key — does it touch the rapture and the magic of these unforgotten chords of supreme poetry? For my own part, I cannot feel that it does, even in such exquisite stanzas as those cited above.

I think again of Shelley's *West Wind* —

> 'O thou
> Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
> The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
> Each like a corpse within its grave, until
> Thine azure sister of the spring shall blow
> Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth.'

Here is the Muse of Hellas who inspired the ἔπεα πτερόεντα of Pindar and of Sappho.

And again I think of Wordsworth's *Ode* —

> 'There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
> The earth, and every common sight,
> To me did seem
> Apparelled in celestial light,
> The glory and the freshness of a dream.'

and so on down to —

> 'To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.'

It is true that the stanzas of *In Memoriam* are more ingenious, more delicately chiselled, more subtle in art, than these Wordsworthian truisms: but they do not altogether rouse one with such a ring; they do not ravish the soul and stamp the memory so deeply; they are not quite so spontaneous, so unaffected, so inimitable; and therefore I feel that they fail to mount into the topmost air of poetic rapture.

But saying this, we do not diminish the laureate's crown. *In Memoriam* must long remain one of our noblest poems, along with Gray's *Elegy*, also a little academic — a poem, it must be allowed, too long and in places rather too obvious, if not trivial. *In Memoriam* will stand along with Coleridge's *Ode to Love*, Keats' *Ode to Autumn*, Marvell's *Odes and Elegies* — superior perhaps to all of these as it is, but still wanting in that amplest breath of the Delphic God. Indeed, with all its art, melody, and charm, we see from time to time in *In Memoriam* a little too visibly 'the sad mechanic exercise,' which is the inevitable result of too rigid and prolonged devotion to the uses of 'measured language.' To Chaucer, to Shakespeare, to Spenser — nay, to Shelley and Burns, to Byron and Keats, poetry never could be for an hour a mechanical exercise. They all, like Shelley's *Skylark*, would pour their 'full heart in profuse strains of unpremeditated art.'

THEOLOGY

So far we have been considering the lyrical form of *In Memoriam* — a form which, if never quite reaching in rapture the supreme bursts of lyric, is after Milton's the most faultlessly chiselled verse in our language. We pass to its substance: and we will say at once that in conception it is not equal to its form. Yet in conception it is a

noble poem. The account of its origin and its long and gradual construction in detached elegies extending over sixteen years, as explained in Hallam Tennyson's valuable *Memoir*, fully disposes of the adverse criticisms that were once passed on the scheme of the poem. The sudden death of Arthur Hallam, and his wonderful promise, gifts, influence, and so forth, form the occasion, the overture, the *motive* of *In Memoriam ;* but these things do not at all form the main substance of the whole. The early death of Edward King was the occasion of *Lycidas ;* but we do not hold Milton literally bound to his belief that his young friend had left no peer on earth. Nor do we take every phrasein Shakespeare's *Sonnets* or Byron's *Childe Harold* as absolute autobiography and not poetry.

As the poet himself tells us, *In Memoriam* is a *Divina Commedia*, a meditative poem, wherein thoughts on death, man's destiny, future life, and the purposes of the Creator gradually lead up to faith in His goodness, and a sober sense of happiness in Resignation and Love. This makes it a real *Divina Commedia* — a bona-fide effort to 'assert eternal Providence and justify the ways of God to men.' But then *In Memoriam* is a *Divine Comedy*, or a *Paradise Lost, longo intervallo.* Putting aside the fact that Tennyson is not a Dante or a Milton, and that his graceful elegies do not pretend to vie with the mighty imagination of these immortal visions, can it be said that either the theology or the philosophy of *In Memoriam* are new, original, with an independent force and depth of their own ? Surely not. They are exquisitely graceful restatements of the current theology of the broad-Churchman of the school of F. D. Maurice and Jowett — a combination of Maurice's somewhat illogical piety with Jowett's philosophy of mystification. As the Darwinian and evolutionary theories discussed are not the original discoveries of the poet in

natural science, so the theological and metaphysical problems are not original contributions to theology or philosophy. They are an admirably tuneful versification of ideas current in the religious and learned world.

Opinions on the poetical value of Tennyson's theology as a poet may be formed by any serious mind, apart from private convictions on the theology itself. Auguste Comte expressed unbounded admiration for the *Divine Comedy* and the *Paradise Lost*, as he did for Thomas à Kempis and Bossuet. So every one of fair mind would rejoice to recognise intellectual grasp, fused by poetic imagination, in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, if he could find in it central ideas treated with native power and new insight. A materialist of feeling can enter heartily into the profound power of *Job*, of the *City of God*, of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, of Bossuet's *Universal History*, little as he believes any dogmas they contain. But does *In Memoriam* teach anything, or transfigure any idea which was not about that time common form with F. D. Maurice, with Jowett, C. Kingsley, F. Robertson, Stopford Brooke, Mr. Ruskin, and the Duke of Argyll, Bishops Westcott and Boyd Carpenter? It is true that Tennyson clothes with exquisite form, and presents almost as so much original thought, the ideas which in 1850 were floating about in the mental atmosphere of Oxford and Cambridge men; he had common ground with the liberal clergy of that date; and also he was in touch with many general ideas of Herschel, Owen, Huxley, Darwin, and Tyndall.

He embodied these discussions, theories, and pious hopes of broad-Churchmen in lovely phrases; but he has in no sense added to them, nor did he give them new power. He did nothing to make a Theodicee of his own, as Dante did for the Catholic creed, and as Milton did for the Puritan creed. Nothing of the kind. *In Memo-*

riam, with all its devotional mysticism, contains no solid thought that we do not find in F. Robertson's *Sermons*, in Jowett's *Essays*, in Dr. Martineau's philosophy, and we may now add, in Arthur Balfour's *Philosophic Doubts* and *Foundations of a Creed*. (Heaven save the mark!)—

> 'Our little systems have their day.'
> 'We have but faith: we cannot know.'

and much to that effect. Well, but we need to know a little more; and Tennyson only again, for the thousandth time, re-echoes most musically our sense of ignorance. For a century, ten thousand pulpits have been echoing the same cry, as have hundreds of beautiful essays full of pious hopes, and vague moanings about something 'behind the veil.' Popes, Caliphs, martyrs, mystics, Bunyan, Swedenborg, and many more have their ideas about what we shall find 'behind the veil.' But we get no further.

Together with *In Memoriam* — what was indeed the prelude, almost the first rough sketch of *In Memoriam*, equal to it in metrical skill and also in meditative power — we must take the *Two Voices*. It might well be urged that the *Two Voices*, in the astonishing art with which its most exacting stanza is managed, in the mastery in which a subtle argument is embodied in terse poetic form, in its richness of metaphysical suggestion, forms the greatest triumph of Tennyson's profounder poems. Our language has few finer examples of argumentative verse. But has the argument the stamp of original genius, of new and pregnant thought? Surely not. The ideas are those which have been worked out in a hundred sermons and essays by able men who, feeling the force of many unsolved problems of metaphysics and of science, still would find æsthetic, moral, and psychological grounds

for 'faintly trusting the larger hope.' Nor can it be denied that throughout this poem, as throughout *In Memoriam* — as in all the metaphysical poems — there runs the undertone of scepticism, of absence at any rate of entire mental assurance and solid *belief*, as distinct from *hope* —

> 'A hidden hope, the voice replied.'
> 'To feel, although no tongue can prove.'
> 'Believing, where we cannot prove.'
> 'We have but faith; we cannot know.'
> 'An infant crying in the night.'
> 'And with no language but a cry.'
> 'Behind the veil, behind the veil.'
> 'There lives more faith in honest doubt,
> Believe me, than in half the creeds!'

No one can deny that all this is exquisitely beautiful; that these eternal problems have never been clad in such inimitable grace. Nor do we doubt that they embody a train of thought very rife in the cultured intellect of our time. But the train of thought is essentially that with which ordinary English readers had been made familiar by F. D. Maurice, Professor Jowett, Dr. Martineau, *Ecce Homo*, *Hypatia*, and now by Arthur Balfour, Mr. Drummond, and many valiant companies of *Septem Contra Diabolum*. The argument in substance is, that as Science is still unable to explain the Universe, and as Metaphysics still nurse their abysmal problems, we should faintly trust the larger hope. Orthodox Churchmen say this larger hope is to be found in the Anglican Prayer Book; orthodox Methodists say it is only to be read in the Bible; Catholics say it is in the living voice of the Church; broad-Churchmen find it in various beautiful and somewhat nebulous visions; but of all believers in the Gospel, they hold to it most 'faintly' and with the largest mixture of perplexity and hesitation. No form of the 'larger hope'

admits more readily of poetic expression than does this. And Tennyson, in many thousand lines, has given it a shape supremely typical of nineteenth-century culture. But he caught up, he did not create, the ideas; and his most melodious transfiguration of this half-sceptical piety does not give him the title of philosophic genius, nor as the living inspiration of the higher problems of our age. He gave it a voice, he did not give it a faith.

In later years the polemical tone of mind rather grew on him, and he wrote several pieces, the substantial argument of which did not rise above the level of the popular sermons, essays, and novels which confute modern philosophy and science. Pamphleteering, even in defence of the Christian verities — much less in advocacy of the 'hidden hope' or 'honest doubt' — is seldom poetry, and the manifest inferiority of these later pieces is proof that the poet was on a wrong scent. Such queer things as that called *Despair*, with its elephantine lines of sixteen syllables, belong to the large group of theological burlesques whereof the *Mighty Atom* presents the most absurd type. Another such piece is the oddity called *Vastness*, with its twenty-syllable lines, in the manner of Walt Whitman, but hardly so rhythmical as his *Leaves of Grass*. Lovers of Tennyson's poetry can only regret these controversial pieces which betray a rather shallow irritability of religious spirit, and form a blot on his otherwise true poetic judgment.

But though Tennyson did at last deviate into utterly unpoetical sermonising, though his great meditative poems followed, rather than created, the current ideas of his time, he amply deserved the immense influence he possessed over the higher religious world. It may be needful now to remind his less reasonable admirers that the poetic expression of current ideas does not fulfil the highest function of the poet. Burns distinctly created the deep

enthusiasm of all true Scots for their race in all types of its simple manliness. Wordsworth created the passion of modern Englishmen for communion with Nature. Byron filled Europe with sympathy for historic Rome and Greece. We cannot claim for Tennyson any such creative influence over men. He did for the religious thought of English Christians in far grander verse, as it was a far nobler type of religious thought, what Young did in his *Night Thoughts* for the religious thought of the last century. From the philosophic point of view, *In Memoriam* is a kind of glorified *Christian Year*. It has made Tennyson the idol of the Angelican clergyman — the world in which he was born and the world in which his whole life was ideally past — the idol of all cultured youth and of all æsthetic women. It is an honourable post to fill. He was in all things a true and illustrious poet. Only, his devotees must remember that he does not reach the rank of Shakespeare, of Milton, of Chaucer, of Spenser — nay, it may be doubted if his ultimate place in our literature will at all overtop that of Burns, Wordsworth, Byron, or Shelley ; men who, with all their defects and all their limitations, did, by original ideas fresh from their own spirit and not at all adapted from contemporary thinkers, give a new impulse to the mind of their age.

'THE IDYLLS'

Hitherto we have considered Tennyson's religious and philosophical pieces (especially *In Memoriam*, the most most perfect of his poems), because his claim to rank as the supreme poet of the nineteenth century must rest on this if on anything. That he is the supreme poet of the Victorian era is too clear for question. The chief poems after *In Memoriam* are the *Idylls of the King*, occupying more than one-fourth of the entire collection of *Poems; The*

Princess, filling about one-twelfth of the collected *Works*; and *Maud*, not half *The Princess* in length. The *Idylls of the King* are the best known and most read of the larger poems, and in some points of view are the most important of all Tennyson's works, inasmuch as they are far the largest, and covered in execution nearly forty years of the poet's life. The twelve books, of over 11,000, lines are in form an epic; they display nearly all the poet's great qualities in turn, except the didactic and the purely lyrical. They are a wonderful monument of sustained and chastened fancy, of noble ideals, and of delicious music.

A volume would not suffice to dilate on all the beauties of the *Idylls*, the romantic halo of chivalry, the glow of colour, the sonorous clang of the battle scenes, the tender pathos of the love scenes, the tragedy of the catastrophe, the final threnody, when 'on the mere the wailing died away.' A volume would not suffice to expatiate on all these graces; and for every lover of poetry, for every reader of taste, such a volume, or even such an essay, is wholly needless.

A far more difficult task is to class these fascinating poems. To what order of poetry do they belong; do they fulfil all their aim; are they an unqualified success? Clearly the *Idylls* do not form a real epic. There is too much pure fancy, too much sentiment, too much of the drawing-room and the lecture-hall — in a word, it is nearer to a modern romance than to an antique epic. It is poetry, exquisite poetry, but no more an epic than Shelley's *Revolt of Islam* is an epic, or than his *Hellas* is a tragedy. The words in which Shelley describes his purpose in the *Revolt of Islam* curiously fit the *Idylls of the King*. 'I have sought to enlist the harmony of metrical language, the ethereal combinations of the fancy, the rapid and subtle transitions of human passion, all those elements which essentially compose a poem, in the cause of a liberal and

comprehensive morality.' That is a perfectly legitimate motive of a poem. And in a certain degree that is what Tennyson has done in his *Idylls*, making his plot infinitely more real, more inteligible, and more interesting than that of Shelley's *Islam*.

In choosing as his theme a well-known romance, adapting and developing a very grand old prose-poem, Tennyson obtained the great advantage of incidents living, thrilling, and even familiar, and thus avoiding the cloudy symbolism of Shelley's scheme, which makes *Islam* a closed book to the ordinary public. But then Tennyson fell on the other horn of the dilemma, which was the risk of travestying the old romance, so that it became more or less incongruous, unnatural, and impossible. Lovers of exquisite verse and of romantic chivalry, who know nothing either of historic chivalry or of the mediæval romances, do not feel the incongruity; and they form the great majority of the Tennysonian public. But from the point of view of actual history and the real Arthurian myth, the filling the old bottle of Malory with the new wine of Alfred Tennyson is an inevitable danger. Lancelot of the Lake is transformed into a sort of Sir Charles Grandison in plate armour; King Arthur becomes a courtier's portrait of the late Prince Consort. Elaine is a new Virginie without her 'Paul,' and Queen Guinevere is a magnificent 'grande dame' of Versailles, with a secret. It is all too much of a pageant or 'revival' in mediæval character, and suggests reminiscences of the Eglinton Tournament and the stage Shakespeare.

We all feel the wonderful skill with which the local colour is maintained, the glamour of antique setting, the tone of mingled chivalry and barbaric rage in the warriors of the Dragon and of the White Horse. But this very realism of painting increases the incongruity of the whole.

These Berserker blood-feasts, these eternal jousts and pageants, these murderous conspiracies and feuds, will not assimilate with the Grand Monarque courtliness of King Arthur, the Quixotic heroisms and sublimated amours of Lancelot, the unearthly passion of the love-lorn maid of Astolat. If the whole poem were cast in a purely ideal world, we could accept it as pure fantasy. But it is not quite an ideal world. Therein lies the difficulty. The scene, though not of course historic, has certain historic suggestions and characters. It is a world far more real than that of Spenser's *Faery Queen*, or Malory's *Morte Darthur*, or Coleridge's *Christabel*. So far as concerns the scene, and the external surroundings, the costumes and the landscapes, we feel these to be a plausible field for a chivalric romance—full of fancy and of poetry, no doubt, but still plausible, intelligible, and coherent. Various episodes, combats, and actions take place upon this scene of a kind consistent with it, and poetically natural to romances of chivalry. Whole books read almost like incidents we might find in Joinville or Froissart done into exquisite poetry.

But then, in the midst of so much realism, the knights, from Arthur downwards, talk and act in ways with which we are familiar in modern ethical and psychological novels; but which are as impossible in real mediæval knights as a Bengal tiger or a Polar bear would be in a drawing-room. The women, from the Queen to Elaine and Enid, behave, not like dames and damsels of mediæval romance, but with the spiritual delicacy and all the soul-bewildering casuistry we study and enjoy in *Hypatia*, *Romola*, *Middlemarch*, or *Helbeck of Bannisdale*. The *Idylls of the King* are an amalgam of mediæval romance and analytical novel. Both mediæval romance and analytical novel may be made full of interest and power. But the attempt to fuse them into one poem is beyond the art of any imagination.

A still greater difficulty beset the poet in his Arthurian epic, in the fact that he does not invent his plot and his characters as Milton, Spenser, and Shelley do in their dream-worlds; but he has simply modernised and bowdlerised a noble old epic which needs no decoration from us. Malory's *Morte Darthur* is a grand poem itself; consistent as a whole, intelligible, and natural as a mediæval romance. Crammed with wild incident, as is Malory's epic — with witchcraft, magic and miracle, blood and battle, lust and rape, villainy and treason — knights and dames behave accordingly. They love, fight, slay, rob, joust, and do deeds of 'derring-do,' and of true love, legal or illegal, like hot-blooded men and women in fierce times, before an idea had arisen in the world of 'reverencing conscience,' of 'leading sweet lives,' of 'keeping down the base in man,' 'teaching high thought,' with 'amiable words and courtliness,' and so forth. Malory's original *Morte Darthur* is plausible as a mediæval romance, with all its devilry and angeltry, its infinite transformation scenes and supernaturalisms, its fierce loves and hates, its blood and crime, and with all its fantastic ideals of 'Honour' and of 'Love.' But in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, the devils and most of the angels disappear, the supernaturalism shrinks to a few incidents; there is a good deal of fighting, but the knights are almost too polite to kill each other; if the ladies do commit *faux pas*, their artifices and compunctions are those of the novel or the stage. And so the whole fierce, lusty epic gets emasculated into a moral lesson, as if it were to be performed in a drawing-room by an academy of young ladies.

No one could complain of using the elements of a poem, as Shelley says, 'in the cause of a liberal and comprehensive morality.' But the lovers of Malory do complain of having his rough-hewn romance modernised and bowdler-

ised into an incongruous medley. It is not fair to the old romancer, and the result is an hermaphrodite kind of work, in spite of all the winning gracefulness which is the peculiarity of such decadent art. The Nibelungen Epic presents to us a mass of tragic horror which suits the fierce war-song it is, and the mythical age in which it is cast. But we should not care to have Siegfried transmuted into a model prince with serious ideas about the social question, Chrimhild and Brunhild become stately royal ladies with a past, and Hagen and Folker exchanging moral sentiments over the corpse of King Gunther. Mr. Pope translated the *Iliad* into Queen Anne heroics, but happily he did not attempt a paraphrase of it in the manner of the *Rape of the Lock*. The *Idylls of the King* are a delicious series of poetic tableaux; and would be pure poetry, if we could forget the incongruity of making belted knights with fairy mothers talking modern morality — noble and musical as the morality is — and if we could forget the fierce clang of battle, and all the rude and unholy adventures that Malory rehearsed once for all in his inimitable mother-tongue.

So far it seemed necessary to face the weaker side of the *Idylls of the King*, because in the conspiracy of silence into which Tennyson's just fame has hypnotised the critics, it is bare honesty to admit defects. And the frank statement of these is forced upon judicious lovers of the laureate's work by the extravagant tone of some of his admirers. Gushing curates and æsthetic young ladies have been heard to talk as if the *Idylls of the King* formed a far grander poem than Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, nay, stood on a level with the *Paradise Lost*. But when the incongruity of his plan and the anomalies of his characters are once frankly admitted, we can all join in acclaiming the splendour of the execution of Tennyson's largest poem. *Elaine*, *Guinevere*, and

the *Passing of Arthur*, in particular, contain poetry as exquisite in picture, in music, in pathos, as any in our language. The speeches of Arthur, of Lancelot, of Pelleas, and of many more, are truly noble, eloquent, and epic in themselves, if we forget for a moment the acts and the other conditions of these heroes in the rest of the poem. The final parting of Arthur and Guinevere, undoubtedly the most dramatic and heroic scene Tennyson ever painted, is a grand conception, if detached from the Round Table story, and if treated simply as a modern (or undated) episode between false wife and magnanimous husband in his agony of shame, wrath, and sorrow.

If the poet had been bidden by some royal taskmaster to perform the unnatural task of converting episodes from the Arthurian cycle into poems fit for the young person of modern culture, it could not have been accomplished with more consummate beauty and faultless delicacy. And in this connection it is significant that the better judgment gives the chief crown of poetry in the whole collection to the original *Morte d'Arthur*, beginning —

'So all day long the noise of battle rolled,'

and ending —

'And on the mere the wailing died away.'

These noble lines, the most perfect in form and the simplest in conception of the *Idylls*, were written in early youth, and are an amazing triumph of precocious art. In them we have an ideal of mystical kinghood and a world of pure fancy, wonder, and weird myth, undisturbed by any incongruous tale of Arthur's blindness and Guinevere's falseness. One used to hear it said at Oxford in the fifties, that if the *Morte d'Arthur* of the early *Poems* was ever completed, it would be the grandest epic in our language.

Alas! this was not to be fulfilled. It still remains the only fragment of real epic in the *Idylls;* the only fragment, because simple, unalloyed with incongruous plot, untainted with modern romance, without ethical or psychological subtleties and graces.

'THE PRINCESS' AND 'MAUD'

As *In Memoriam* is certainly the most perfect of Tennyson's longer poems, and as the *Idylls of the King* form the most important part or his work, by the scale, variety, and elaboration of the whole series, so we must count *The Princess* and *Maud* as his most characteristic and typical achievements. *The Princess* was published in 1847, when the poet was thirty-eight; *Maud* in 1855, when he was forty-six. In *The Princess* Tennyson chose a subject in which all his genius found full play, which was entirely within all his resources. It was far lighter in design, much better fitted for his wonderful gifts of sweetness and grace, than the wild legends of the Arthurian cycle. It was no epic — not even an 'epyll,' or cross, we may say, between the epic and idyll. It was, as it was entitled, a 'Medley.' It was a fantastic idyllic romance, with a gentle undertone of moral purpose, not without a great deal of modern 'sentiment,' and some graceful and lady-like banter. Here was a subject which was curiously in harmony with the poet's temperament and exquisite refinement. He was not called upon to build up an epic, or even an episode in an epic — a thing for which he had (possibly knew that he had) no real mission. But the fantastic romance, cast in an undefined ideal world, and interfused with an ethical evangel — an idyll of chivalry told to a bevy of young ladies in a drawing-room, with an eye to their moral improvement — here was a field in

which Tennyson had no superior or equal. It may not have been the highest field of a great poet's aspiration, but, in its own line, the poem is a bewitching success. The result is a piece of unbounded popularity, the charms of which satisfy the most scrupulous criticism as completely as they enthrall the whole reading public.

Maud is, in some ways, the most original of all Tennyson's conceptions. It is the first of those he chose for reading to his friends. It contains the most complex and subtle plot of any of the pieces which he constructed for himself. As an elaborate psychological analysis, he never produced anything on such a scale. The method of its composition — from the catastrophe back to the origin — as it is explained in the *Memoir*, is very singular and characteristic. The poem certainly contains the poet's most subtle insight into the human heart and brain. It contains also some of his most stirring eloquence, his fiercest passion, and undoubtedly much of his most entrancing melodies. The contrast between the dark mysteries of its opening — 'the dreadful hollow,' 'dabbled with blood-red heath,' 'the ghastly pit,' 'the red-ribbed ledges drip with a silent horror of blood' — and then the passing to the 'Birds in the high Hall-garden,' 'go not, happy day,' and so on to the miraculous music of 'Come into the garden, Maud' — this contrast is profoundly impressive.

But with all the originality of *Maud* as a psychologic study, and all its luscious music, it is not a complete success. We must agree with Ruskin's complaint, amidst all his admiration, that he did not quite like the 'sad story' and the 'wild kind of versification.' The story is more than sad: it is painful, it is ghastly, without being quite tragic. It is never pleasant to hear one recounting the phases of his own mania. And the wildly Bacchantic prosody of the strophes, though often beautiful, and always

skilful, produces the effect of a *pot pourri* in a poem of such length — some 1500 lines. But there is a more serious criticism to be made. The story is a psychologic romance, more fit for prose than for verse. In poetry it is rather too analytic, complex, and introspective for entire enjoyment and ready comprehension. And the romance itself is gruesome and somewhat revolting, as a basis for so much fancy and such delicate melodies. It is slightly incongruous, as if the story of Eugene Aram were set to music for the flute. Subtle mysteries of crime and lunacy are endurable in an analytic novel, but do not tell well or even intelligibly in dulcet lyrics. Tens of thousands of men and women imagine themselves to love *Maud* as a poem, with very faint understanding of its mysterious plot and its morbid psychology.

Tennyson hardly ever wrote without a moral purpose of some kind. But his attempt to weave into a gastly story of crime, avarice, and insanity a fervid hymn to the moral value of national War, was, to say the least, a little irrelevant. It may have been right to denounce the Manchester school of politicians and to glorify the Crimean War as an Ethical Crusade in defence of the 'higher life,' but it prevented many worthy people from doing justice to the beauties of the poem. They would have thought it poisonous rant to preach, that the only way to cure the sin and fraud of great cities was to embark in a big war, were it not that they found this remarkable evangel of the nineteenth century after Christ put into the mouth of a somewhat crazy 'degenerate,' with memories of a blurred and bloody past.

LYRICS ARD IDYLLS

It is a far happier task to turn to the more distinctly lyrical work of Tennyson — that whereon his permanent

fame must abide. From the early *Claribel* to the final *Crossing the Bar*, separated by some sixty years of production, Tennyson's pure lyrics stand in the front rank of English lyrical achievement. It is needless to dilate on what every one has admired — man, woman, and child; scholar, simple, critic, or general public. Nor has the praise and delight in this exquisite music been excessive or mistaken. It is a field where the student of Sappho and Catullus join hands with the girl in the schoolroom in unbounded admiration. The marvel is that these songs, with their luscious melody, their Æolic chiselling of phrase, their simple completeness, were the work of so young a poet, came forth full-fledged from the egg. That such pieces as *Mariana*, *Oriana*, *Fatima*, the *Merman and Mermaid*, should be thrown off by an unknown youth is amazing. That such a genius for melody should have been retained to the age of eighty, and produce in old age songs like *The Throstle* and *Early Spring*, is almost more amazing. The wealth as well as the beauty of Tennyson's lyrical productions places him in the foremost rank of our lyrists — strong as our literature has been for many centuries in that form of poetry.

The unanimous voice of the public has been right in fastening on the best of these lyrics, so that they have become household words, as familiar as those of Milton or Burns. *The Miller's Daughter*, *The Lotos-Eaters*, *Break, break, break*, the *Dream of Fair Women*, *Locksley Hall*, *The Light Brigade*, *The Revenge*, are equally popular, and in various modes deserve their immense vogue. Above all others are the songs in *The Brook*, in *The Princess*, and in *Maud*. Of them all, no doubt, the songs in *The Princess* are the most bewitching: 'The splendour falls on castle walls' — 'Tears, idle tears' — 'O swallow, swallow' — 'Now sleeps the crimson petal' — and lastly, 'Come down,

O maid,' with its miraculous couplet, 'The moan of doves' — assuredly the most felicitous bit of imitative music in modern poetry, perhaps even in all English poetry.

Even whilst under the spell of these siren chants, we must not suffer ourselves to be drawn into any false raptures. The lyrics, with all their charm, hardly rise to the Olympian radiance of a lyric by Sappho or Sophocles. They do not move us like *Lycidas* or Shakespeare's *Songs;* no! nor like such ballads as the *Twa Corbies* or the *Land o' the Leal, John Anderson, O Waly Waly*, or *Fair Helen*. They have not that audible ring that we hear in Shelley's *Skylark*, and several others of Shelley's best lyrics. Nor have they that inexplicable pathos of Lovelace's *Althea*, and some Scottish songs of Burns and Scott. The music of Tennyson's loveliest songs is somewhat languorous. It is —

> 'Music that gentlier on the spirit lies,
> Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes.'

Exquisite, exquisite! but a little cloying — the true moan of melancholy lotos-eaters! In all these songs we faint under the dulcet sounds of harp and flute, but we miss the trumpet and bassoon. We miss the lilt of *Scots Wha Hae*, of *A man's a man for a' that*, the passion of *Duncan Gray*, the indescribable enthralment of the *Ancient Mariner*. No one thinks of putting Tennyson's place in poetry below that of Burns, Scott, or Coleridge. But even in his happiest lyrics, there is some want of the clarion note that they from time to time could sound.

We do not altogether *hear* Tennyson shout forth these verses: we rather *see* him piecing them together, with consummate art, but without that ungovernable tempest of feeling which marks the highest lyric, so that speech seems to fail the poet, and he bursts into unrestrainable

song. Tennyson's lyrics are all exquisitely melodious and marvellously worked. But the very melody and the work somewhat lessen our sense of their spontaneous inspiration. And of all forms of poetry, lyric most needs the sense of being inspired song, inevitable outpouring of heart

The essence of lyric is *feeling* — passion, the thrill of joy, anguish, or strife. No one can dispute the feeling of Tennyson's lyrics; but it is usually clothed in such subtle graces of fancy, in such artful cadences, in such enamelled colouring, that it strikes the imagination more than the heart. We feel this even in such an exquisite ballad as *Edward Gray;* which, with all its pathos, is somewhat too pretty, too artful, too modern. The songs are not quite simple, and the expression of *feeling* must be simple. Burns's songs are inverbal refinement mere peasant's catches as compared with Tennyson's subtle modulations. But they have the thrill which rings through and through us. We *hear* them sung, even as we do in such immortal songs as 'Take, Oh! take those lips away,' or 'Come away, come away, Death!' In Molière's *Misanthrope*, Alceste justly prefers 'J'aime mieux ma mie, O gai!' to the most ingenious sonnet. That is the supreme charm of Shakespeare's songs — 'Full fathom five thy Father lies!' 'Tell me where is Fancy bred!' — a child can follow this; might even utter it. No words could be more natural and easy. And this ring from the heart's chords is in Burns's songs, from 'O, my Luve is like a red, red rose' down to the tipsy fun of 'The Deil cam fiddling through the town.' Scott, who is only a very fine poet in a few songs, has this incommunicable *cantabile*, which Shelley often, Byron and Wordsworth and Keats once or twice, have touched. Tennyson's lyrics, as we all feel, have exquisite music; but it is the music of recitation, of memory, of thought, rather

than of song. They are too luscious, too brocaded to be sung. But if they miss this thrill which forces forth the voice, they gain in poetic colour, in complex harmony, in translucence. Thousands of lovers of *The Princess* linger over the melting cadences of the songs therein — 'Tears, idle tears,' 'O swallow, swallow,' 'Now sleeps the crimson petal,' 'Come down, O maid' — without knowing that these lovely lines are composed in heroic blank verse — the same metre as *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. They wring us like the *Cujus animam* of Rossini's *Stabat Mater*. But, like that wonderful dirge, they are a little too languorous — have too much *morbidezza* for great art.

But if the songs, with all their 'linked sweetness long drawn out,' with all that 'melting voice through mazes running,' speak to us with the mind rather than the voice, Tennyson has appropriated a form of lyric poem which is peculiarly his own, and in which he is supreme. This is the real idyll of which *Œnone* is the type. The *Idylls of the King* are not true idylls. Edmund Lushington wished to call them epylls, or little epics. They are not epics, because they have not the note of sustained heroism — what Matthew Arnold called 'the grand manner'; they have too much of *genre*, of sentiment, of modern colouring and ethical reflection. On the other hand, they are not idylls, because they have too much action and pure narration, too much of romantic drama, and too much allegory and moral lesson. But *Œnone* is a true idyll — not too long, a single incident of rural simplicity, a beautiful picture of an ideal world presented in romantic setting. It isa romance, based on an Homeric legend, but saturated with modern *ethos*. It is like a delicious Correggio — say, the *Venus, Mars, and Cupid* of the Louvre, with its wonderful *chiaroscuro* and sunlight playing through the leaves over the warm and palpitating flesh. The Venus of Cor-

reggio is not in the least Homer's Aphrodite any more than Mars is Ares: they are deities of Olympus as imagined by Renascence fancy. So the *Œnone* of Tennyson is no nymph of the *Iliad*, any more than the evil-hearted Paris is the son of the epical Priam: much less do Herè and Pallas talk like the Queen and Virgin of the Epic. The whole conception is an Hellenic myth in a setting of modern romance. So the idylls of Theocritus, of Virgil, of Tasso, of Shakespeare present to us some tale of antique simplicity with a colouring entirely that of the poet's own. It is a legitimate and exquisite form of art, like the Greek goddesses of Botticelli or Raffaelle. And these true idylls of Tennyson are delightful specimens of its resources and its beauties.

Œnone was a marvellous production of a youth only just of age; and it still remains the most delightful of them all. *Ulysses*, but a few years later, had a deeper and grander strain, if it had fewer fancies and charms. And *Tithonus*, begun about the same time as *Ulysses*, is hardly inferior in form. It is astonishing that *Tiresias*, *Œnone's Death*, and *Demeter*, separated from the early idylls by some fifty years, should retain as much of the early fire and music; but it must be confessed that, to say the least, they add nothing to our enjoyment of these pieces. *St. Simeon Stylites*, *Lucretius*, *Columbus*, *St. Telemachus*, belong to a rather different order of art. They are dramatic and reflective poems, like Wordsworth's *Laodamia* or *Michael*. Tennyson's pure idylls, of which *Œnone* is the gem, offer every perfection of his art, and are the form of poetry which best suits his genius. If they do not possess the magical simplicity of Theocritus at his highest, they have a dignity and thoughtfulness which place them above such popular and melodious pieces as those left to us by Bion and Moschus.

ROMANCES AND ODES

The mastery of Tennyson over philosophical argument and pictorial harmonies, and the force with which his masterpieces in meditative and in romantic verses haunt the memory, rather lead us to forget two other forms of art in which he is no less excellent. These are, first, the humorous, secondly the tragic. Few of his pieces are more popular than the *Northern Farmer*, and none more entirely deserves its immense vogue. We must say both forms of the *Northern Farmer*, with their insight into the humours of rural boorishness, middle-class meanness, and their astonishing command of dialect. The poet's command over dialect, as shown in *Owd Roa*, the *Spinster's Sweet-arts*, in the *Promise of May*, the *Northern Cobbler*, and again of the Irish dialect in *To-morrow*, would be enough to establish a reputation. For their local fidelity is as great as their phonetic ingenuity. These dialect poems, together with the amusing experiments in classical metres, are decisive evidence of the extraordinary ease with which Tennyson strikes from his lyre every note at will. And this command over every kind of metre was the result, not only of his natural genius for rhythm, but of close and unceasing study of prosody, as appears from constant anecdotes and judgments recorded in the *Memoir* by his son.

The humour of the *Northern Farmer*, old and new, has created a type as familiar, and as likely to be enduring, as that of Pecksniff or Becky Sharp or Mrs. Poyser. The *Vision of Sin* was an early revelation of this power; and it was shown as a rare but quite visible thread through the whole of his work, from *The Sleeping Beauty* down to *The Foresters*. Those who heard the poet talk with friends well knew the strain of robust humour which underlay all his intellect and his taste. Indeed, a countryman, entering

into casual talk with him during a stroll, or at an inn, might for the first ten minutes have mistaken the poet for a rather rough-and-ready humourist. And the *Memoir* is full of examples how hearty a gift of humour lay beneath those sombre meditations and subtle modulations which are the familiar type of Tennyson's verse.

Tennyson, it is often said, is not at his best in the ode. Neither of the odes to the Royal Princesses as brides have any particular value beyond an occasional line or phrase; the *Jubilee Ode* is a melancholy failure; and the *Exhibition Odes* are not much of a success. But it is not fair to judge a poet by poems commanded of him as laureate on occasions of state. Homer would have been flat if Priam had commanded an ode for the wedding of Troilus and Cressida. But there was one ode in a far nobler strain. *The Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington* has, to my ears, a note which Tennyson rarely struck — a Doric note of heroic mode, with a breadth and masculine ring of the classical ode of triumph and lament. It is in many things the least Tennysonian of Tennyson's poems. It has his wonderful gift of imitative music, but it is the music of the funeral march as composed by Handel or Beethoven. I remember the ode being recited, when one who had been present at the burial in St. Paul's, having imperfectly heard the recitation, thought it was a recital of the music used at the funeral. The lines, 'Bury the great Duke,' 'Let the long, long procession go,' and the whole of the three strophes with which the ode opens, are a magnificent re-echoing in words of great funeral music: —

> 'And let the mournful martial music blow,
> The last great Englishman is low.'

The whole of these five strophes are worthy of the occasion, and contain lines and couplets which have passed into

current use. But the thought with which the sixth opens, the abrupt cry of Nelson from his tomb beneath the dome: 'Who is he that cometh like an honoured guest,' this, I hold, is one of the grandest conceptions in modern poetry. The suddenness of this burst from the spirit of our greatest seaman, who had slumbered in peace for half a century, its directness and its simplicity, reach the highest note of lyric imagination, and the extreme boldness of the idea is fully justified by the answer —

> 'Mighty Seaman, this is he,
> Was great by land as thou by sea.'

This is true poetry, Pindaric, natural, and thrilling, in simple words and devoid of any prettiness of imagery or subtlety of phrase. Tennyson's *Works* — nay, modern poetry have no nobler inspiration.

However alien to his Muse it may be thought, Tennyson from time to time would find themes of passion, horror, and crime, when he matched himself with Shelley, Byron, and Coleridge in their darkest hours. These themes were not altogether akin to his temperament, and at times he wanted sting and realism for such grim work. But from the first he displayed his power in such a poem as *The Sisters.* Of course, this was the early *Sisters* — 'We were two daughters of one race' — for, oddly enough, in the collected *Works*, there are two poems of the same title, and the later *Sisters* is not a success at all. *The Sisters* of the early ballad is a grand and stirring peace, in imitation, no doubt, of the *Twa Corbies* or *Helen of Kirkconnell*, and would be fit to be placed beside these wonderful poems, had it been rather simpler, more reticent, with less of visible artifice. But it is a fine example of the tragic ballad. *Fatima*, again, has the true glow of Eastern passion —

'O Love, O fire! once he drew
With one long kiss my whole soul thro'
My lips, as sunlight drinketh dew.'

It is curious that Tennyson's wonderful ear and subtle modulations occasionally played him false and betrayed him into a solecism of speech. Not to insist on the false rhyme of 'through' with 'dew,' which involves the mispronunciation of 'dew' as 'do,' or of 'through' as 'threw,' the first of the cited lines involves a fault in prosody, or a mispronunciation of 'fire' as 'fi-er,' a dissyllable. This is really a cockneyism, and unfortunately it is one into which the poet's fondness for rusticity in speech occasionally led him. Even the exquisite line in *The Lotos-Eaters* is printed in all editions thus —

'Than *tir'd* eyelids upon *tir'd* eyes.'

Here the prosody twice makes *tir'd* a dissyllable, as if it were 'ti-er'd'! This is almost a vulgarism. Of course, the line should be written —

'Than tired eyelids upon tired eyes.'

Thus, however softly the *-ed* is sounded, it would destroy the musical cadence of the verse. It is no doubt rare, but it is certain that Tennyson now and then makes a false rhyme, due to careless or defective enunciation, which in one so hyper-sensitive of words and so correct is singular. The most conspicuous instance of that is *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, where the word *hundred* rhymes first with *blunder'd*, as if it were pronounced *hunderd*, and then with *thunder'd*, *wonder'd*, and *sunder'd*. Yokels, no doubt, do say *hunderd*, but it should not be immortalised in serious poetry.

Tennyson's tragic, or rather melodramatic, romances are not usually so simple, direct, and yet mysterious as this

form of poetry demands, to have unqualified success, in spite of their beauty of form. The tragic romance of which the *Twa Corbies* is a perfect type must deal with naked terror, devoid of a single ornament. It must state the prime visible facts with absolute clearness and precision; it must not fill up the story, but leaves much in mystery and horror. Tennyson's essays in this most exacting art are somewhat too elaborate, with too many graces, and too little left obscure. The story is worked out rather too much in detail, and yet is not quite clear. One or other of these defects rather detracts from the value of such pieces as the *Vision of Sin*, *The Victim*, *The Wreck*, *The Flight*, *To-morrow*, and *Forlorn*.

But there is one piece, and that a poem of his latest period, which is a perfect triumph in the style of grisly romance. *Rizpah* has every quality which a poem of the class demands. The theme is entirely natural, dreadful, and yet historically true — indeed, the poem strictly follows recorded facts. These gruesome facts it narrates with entire plainness, simplicity, and vividness. The story of the mother's agony, madness, and frantic clinging to the bones of her felon son — 'the bones that had sucked her, the bones that had moved in her side' — is given with wonderful power. Altogether it is as weird and impressive as anything of the kind in our literature. And the passion and delirium of the mother's wail almost reconcile us to the unfortunate metre with sixteen syllables in each line.

METRICAL SYSTEM AND DRAMAS

This curious turn for enormously long lines seemed to grow on Tennyson with age. We all enjoyed the metre of *Locksley Hall* with its prosody of eight trochees, the last *catalectic* or cut short. But this familiar line of 15 sylla-

bles is as long as English words can conveniently bear. *Rizpah* is even longer. But *The Wreck* and *Despair* became fatiguing in the mob of syllables without a pause. The first line of *Despair* is —

'Is it you that preach'd in the chapel there looking over the sand?'

This is not poetry, with 16 syllables and 52 letters in the line. The first line of *Charity* is —

'What am I doing, you say to me, wasting the sweet summer hours?'

The first line of *Kapiolani* is —

'When from the terrors of Nature a people have fashion'd and worship a Spirit of Evil.'

Here we have 23 syllables and 68 letters.

The first line of the *Iliad* has 16 syllables and 30 letters. The first line of *Paradise Lost* has 10 syllables and 34 letters. A language like our own, with an abnormal proportion of consonants and unmusical syllables, is peculiarly unfit to endure the piling up of words in lines of verse.

This proneness to metres of preposterous length grew on the poet with age, and became at last a tiresome mannerism. None other of our poets had previously adopted it. But, unluckily, Tennyson set a fashion which in our day has been very prevalent. It is a fault in prosody which no other poetry but ours has committed; and unhappily the English language, by its agglomeration of consonants and its often uncouth syllables, is peculiarly unfitted to submit to such a burden.

Another peculiarity of Tennyson's verse is the excessive use in blank verse of monosyllables. There are passages of the *Idylls of the King* where monosyllabic lines are in the proportion of 1 in 4, and where lines of more than one polysyllable are only in the proportion of 1 in 4. There

are whole passages where nothing is admitted but an occasional polysyllable, and line after line contains only one dissyllable and all the rest are monosyllables.

Take the very fine passage in the death-wound of King Arthur, *The Passing of Arthur*, about line 150 —

> 'Then spake the king: "My house hath been my doom.
> But call not thou this traitor of my house
> Who hath but dwelt beneath one roof with me.
> My house are rather they who sware my vows,
> Yea, even while they break them, own'd me king.
> And well for thee, saying in my dark hour,
> When all the purport of my throne hath fail'd,
> That quick or dead thou holdest me for king.
> King am I, whatsoever be their cry:
> And one last act of kinghood shalt thou see
> Yet, ere I pass." And uttering this the king
> Made at the man; then Modred smote his liege
> Hard on that helm which many a heathen sword
> Had beaten thin; while Arthur at one blow,
> Striking the last stroke with Excalibur,
> Slew him, and all but slain himself, he fell.'

Here are sixteen lines. Out of these, twelve lines consist of monosyllables or of monosyllables with one single dissyllable. One other line has the weak polysyllable 'whatsoever.' Only three lines out of the sixteen have more than one polysyllable. This of course is measuring by prosody, which makes 'uttering' a trochee (— ∪). Two of the three lines with more than one polysyllable contain proper names. In the sixteen lines there are 130 monosyllables and only 17 polysyllables, including the proper names.

No one can deny that these are noble lines, nor that the use of Biblical monosyllables gives strength and solemnity to the verse. But when it grows into a studied system, it becomes a mannerism, almost an affectation.

It is true that Milton carried to excess the use of polysyllables. But how magnificent is the roll of those majestic heroics —

> 'Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world, and all our woe
> With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful seat.'

and so on down to —

> 'That to the height of this great argument
> I may assert eternal providence,
> And justify the ways of God to men.'

In the first hundred lines of *Paradise Lost* there are only four lines of pure monosyllables, and only twenty-one lines with a single polysyllable. That is to say, whilst four-fifths of Milton's lines consist of more than one polysyllable, only one-fifth of Tennyson's are so constructed. Milton very rarely resorts to lines consisting solely of monosyllables, though he knows how to use such prosody with grand effect, as in —

> 'Nor the deep tract of hell, say first what cause.'
> 'If thou beest he; but oh, how fallen! how chang'd.'

In that most magnificent prelude to the third book of *Paradise Lost*, the first hundred lines contain only four consisting of monosyllables; and thepassage, one of the very grandest in the whole range of English poetry, contains a succession of lines rich in sonorous polysyllables —

> 'Hail, Holy Light, offspring of heav'n first-born,
> Or of the Eternal Coeternal beam
> May I express thee unblam'd? Since God is light,
> And never but in unapproached light
> Dwelt from eternity; dwell then in thee,
> Bright effluence of bright essence increate.'

In these six magnificent lines, all but one have each more than one polysyllable, and the exception has a word of four syllables.

Such, too, is Shakespeare's practice, fond as he is of powerful monosyllabic lines. For instance, take the great speech of Mark Antony in *Julius Cæsar* —

'O pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth.'

Here, in twenty-two lines, there is not a single monosyllabic line.

Compare Wordsworth's scheme of metre. Take the *Lines written above Tintern Abbey*. In the first hundred and ten lines of this glorious poem, there are but two consisting of mere monosyllables, and the sonorous polysyllables are thrown broadcast through the whole poem —

'His little, nameless, unremembered acts.'

'The still, sad music of humanity.'

'Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns.'

'A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought.'

Compare Coleridge's scheme of prosody. In his noble *Hymn in the Vale of Chamouny* (eighty-four lines) there are but three of simple monosyllables, and some of the grandest lines are composed of polysyllables —

'Thy habitation from eternity!'

'I worshipped the Invisible alone.'

'Who sank thy sunless pillars deep in Earth?
Who filled thy countenance with rosy light?
Who made thee parent of perpetual streams?'

'Earth, with her thousand voices, praises God.'

A careful comparison of Tennyson's blank verse with that of other great masters will show that he made it a

deliberate system to resort to monosyllables ; and although he has certainly left us some lovely examples of lines rich in polysyllables, as a rule he reduced these to a *minimum*, so that monosyllabic lines at last became a mannerism. No man with an ear for poetry will deny the power and dignity of the monosyllabic line in the hands of a master. But when we feel that this had become a conscious or instinctive habit, and we have hundreds of lines in succession with reiterated monosyllables, whilst a trisyllable or a quadrisyllable is admitted as a rare licence, the inevitable result is monotony. We feel the simple force of such lines as —

'Gone thro' my sin to slay and to be slain.'

'Then rose the king and moved his host by night.'

But there is an effect of *staccato*, as musicians call it, and we feel a richer melody in Wordsworth's —

'The still, sad music of humanity.'

or these of Milton —

'Won from the void and formless infinite.'

'Thrones, dominations, princedoms, virtues, Pow'rs!'

'These are thy glorious works, Parent of good,
Almighty, thine this universal frame.'

In all the tens of thousands of Tennyson's lines of blank verse, he never once sounded this organ-note.

A wonderful fact in Tennyson's career as a poet was the prolonged period of his productive power. It extended over no less than sixty-seven years (1827–1894), if we count in the last emendations of the revised *Works*, or to sixty-five years, if we limit it from the earliest to the latest poems. A period so great is almost without example, for it exceeds that of Wordsworth and of Victor Hugo. But, as so often happens with poetic products, the power of the

later does not equal that of the earlier inspiration. If we divide the period of Tennyson's poetic activity into two halves, it is obvious that the first half — say, from 1830 to 1860 — contains his most important and permanent work. Within this period fall the most familiar *Lyrics*, *The Princess* (1847), *In Memoriam* (1850), *Ode on the Duke of Wellington* (1852), *Maud* (1855), *Idylls of the King* (first series, 1859). We cannot count the later *Idylls*, the continuation poems, and the later *Ballads*, as having the power or the vitality of the great typical triumphs of the poet. At the publication of the first *Idylls of the King* (1859), Tennyson was fifty years old, and he had reached his zenith.

For this reason, it is not necessary to discuss the *Dramas*. They were all published at a late period of life; and their most salient quality is that they were the work of the poet's old age. *Queen Mary*, the earliest of them, was published in 1875, when the poet was in his sixty-sixth year; *Becket*, the most successful of them, was printed (but not published) in 1879; and *The Foresters* was not produced until 1892, when the poet was in his eighty-third year. The four English historical dramas are all finely studied and worked out with that mastery of poetic form and that dignity of conception which Tennyson brought to all his work. They will always have great interest for the students of English literature, and for the lovers of our laureate's art. In an age which had more taste for the higher drama, and less passion for prurient melodrama, they might be seen on the stage more often than they are. Some day it is possible that *Becket*, as an historical drama, and *The Foresters*, as a scenic operetta, may be adapted by a modern playwright, and heard with pleasure by a cultivated audience. But the seven dramas, taken as a whole, add nothing to the enduring place in our

poetic roll which Tennyson will hold; nor would it increase the honor we pay to his genius, were we to discuss the dramas in detail, or insist on their public performance.

PLACE IN ENGLISH POETRY

It is not reasonable, nor is it fair, to compare Tennyson with Milton; and it is not reasonable to compare Tennyson with any poet whatever. We leave it to undergraduates, all agog about their honours, to concoct class-lists of the poets, and to give marks: from Shakespeare with a *maximum*, or 'highest possible,' down to the laureate of the day. Those who love poetry love all fine poets in turn. And Tennyson is a fine poet. His great gift is in lyric, in exquisite melody, in chastened perfection of phrase, in pathetic reflection and a certain metaphysical musing. Viewing his work as a whole, his most ardent admirers feel that in him form dominates the imagination; his fancy is even greater than his originality; he is more the artist than the thinker. No man can be a poet at all without fine form, nor without fancy; and unless he be the artist first, he cannot be poet. But for all this imagination, originality, intellect, — all in supreme degree, — are the essence of the poet of the first order.

The paramount influence of Tennyson, like that of Homer in the old world, of Raffaelle in painting, of Pope in the verse, and Johnson in the prose of the last century, has no doubt exerted a somewhat weakening influence over his immediate contemporaries. The conspicuous and surpassing quality of Tennyson was his dainty felicity of phrase, his faultless chiselling, and his imperturbable refinement. Now these are just the qualities which an age of literary culture, specially trained in the study of language, found most readily imitable, and men fell to imi-

tating it with all the zeal that a scholar feels in imitating Virgil and Ovid. The result was that hundreds of men and women took to inditing, and most of them to publishing, Tennysonian lyrics and idylls, quite as much like *In Memoriam*, *Maud*, and *Œnone* as college exercises are like the *Georgics* and the *Heroides*. Tennyson's overpowering fame and influence spread abroad the idea that poems were made by faultless phrasing, and that conception was a detail. *Poeta nascitur non fit.* But they would have it that fine poems could be concocted by an artful manipulation of the most choice language. And indeed, even in the Master himself, there is at times a suggestion, a reminiscence, of the wonders achieved by the glorified Latin verses of a consummate scholar.

Poeta nascitur, et fit, was Tennyson's very happy and true epigram. The profoundly interesting *Memoir* by his son (all the more interesting that it is largely the poet's own autobiography, together with anecdotes and reminiscences collected by his family and friends) shows us at every step how laborious a student of the *arcana* of all forms of poetry was Tennyson, and also how unerring was his own judgment about his work and that of others. Nothing that could tend to perfect poetic expression did Tennyson neglect or undervalue. Of all the pieces which are now given to the public for the first time in the *Memoir*, as having been omitted or condemned by the poet, there is not one of which his judicious lovers will regret the omission from the collected *Works*. Few poets have been quite good judges of their own work, but Tennyson seemed to have an unerring critical faculty. No doubt his impeccable taste, his faultlessness, somewhat detract from his greatness as a poet. Andrea del Sarto was called the *maestro senza errore*. And we feel that, with all his charm, Andrea at times becomes almost cloying with his serene

perfection, his unfailing *dolcezza*. Tennyson, too, is the *maestro senza errore*. He is almost too faultless, too completely master of himself, with too refined a taste and too elaborate a training.

Raffaelle and Andrea del Sarto were terrible snares to the academies. Clever students could catch something of their elegance, their correct drawing, their harmony of composition, and it ended in the classicalities of Guido, Poussin, and the Caracci. And it is because the *imitation* of Tennyson is a plausible and prevalent foible of poetic aspirants, that it becomes a duty of serious judges to speak of Tennyson's strength and of his weakness more openly than it has been usual to speak. The academic Osrics of our day, carried away by the almost Virgilian felicity of Tennyson's diction, are too apt to cheapen Byron, Wordsworth, and Shelley, who have all of them committed stuff that is almost bungler's work, if compared withthe workmanship of *In Memoriam*. Byron, it is true, would slide into slovenly rhetoric when his bad days came on; he made slips in his grammar, and solecisms of speech which would scandalise a High-school girl; and he hardly ever wrote twenty consecutive verses without a forced rhyme or some commonplace. Wordsworth was capable of goody-goody drivel and egregious prosing; and as Matthew Arnold said, the most ardent Wordsworthians are ready to pass by whole pages of poems unremembered and unread. And Shelley, though he was not, as the same critic tells us, 'an ineffectual Angel,' does undoubtedly soar up into transcendental empyreans where we quite lose sight of him, as we do when we watch a balloon mounting into the mists. Tennyson, of course, never descends to vulgarisms, commonplace, or mystification. But, for all that, it does not follow that he is a far greater poet than Byron, Shelley, or Wordsworth.

Byron, Shelley, or Wordsworth, each in different ways, stirred and shook men's minds and coloured the whole mental atmosphere of their generation. Byron, with all his weakness and all his evil, was, as Goethe saw, the most imposing personality in English literature of his own generation. Even if we were to admit that he was but a slovenly poet, he was a great genius: a Titan in that union of energy and intellect which imposes ideas on an age and creates new imaginative worlds. The proof is that his influence on other nations has been greater than that of any poet of this century, or even of the last. Byron is one of the very few poets who have wielded a power over the mind of entire Europe; and both Goethe, Scott, Manzoni, and Victor Hugo owed their power to their prose as well as their verse. Whole generations, and many nations which never heard of Tennyson, Wordsworth, or Shelley, are familiar with Byron, and have been influenced by Byron. And it is a paradox to assert that one whose poetry has profoundly influenced modern society is to be denied the name of a true poet, because he often wrote scrambling and slovenly lines. The essence of poetry is potent and original imagination — the note which dwells on the memory and colours the life of men.

Wordsworth, again, has certainly given a new tone to the thoughts and feeling of Englishmen. Nature wears to us a new aspect, speaks to the heart with a new power, ever since Wordsworth wrote. And Shelley has carried this worship of nature into a kind of pantheism which has influence over minds such as Wordsworth does not wholly satisfy and fill. Since Shelley gave to this century his immortal descants, the lovers of the higher poetry, a faithful few it may be, have had opened to them from the turmoil of this age a new heaven and a new earth.

It would be too much to claim for Tennyson any such

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European influence as that of Byron, or the creative originality of Wordsworth or Shelley. Byron, Wordsworth, and Shelley were all fired with moral and social ideas which they preached and flung, or even stormed out, to their generation. Right or wrong, wholesome or morbid, these ideas filled them and their poems, and have to some degree moulded the thoughts of men, sometimes even by reaction and repulsion. There is something of the prophet and the reformer about them all; they dealt with the problems of the moral and social life of their age, the political and ethical evangels of an age of storm and change. That they were often wrong-headed, utopian, even mischievous, is true. But their imagination played very largely round the causes, the ideals, the dilemmas which shook society around them, and, in a certain degree, in new forms shake us all to-day. Tennyson did this with far less conviction and with no such power. He meditated in exquisite cadences about death, futurity, creation, but in a rather hesitating spirit, and with most musical insistence on the 'faith in honest doubt.' But he held aloof in a somewhat detached position from the great social seethings of his age. He lay beside the nectar of his lovely melodies, and his bolts were hurled far below him in the valleys where men moil and fight. Honest doubt and faint trust in the larger hope are often soothing, even soporific and beautiful, but they do not make a new epoch in poetry or thought.

The only national and social causes into which Tennyson ever flung his whole heart were the modern fad of Imperialism and the glorification of British arms. The expansion of empire, Indian and African battues, are sufficiently popular with the public to do without poetic stimulus — *nec carent vate sacro.* They have their own Tyrtæus, whose odes are sung to the accompaniment of a brass band. Such ballads ring most untunefully in the lofty music of

English literature, and they enter into unworthy competition with the sensations provided for us by the daily press. It is not of course any question of political differences. A real lover of high poetry, whatever his politics, were he the veriest 'little Englander' or Quaker, can take delight in the martial enthusiasm of Scott, the patriotics of Burns, the war-songs of Campbell — those were indeed times to stir a poet's fire — and he takes delight in Manzoni's *Cinque Maggio*, or in Tennyson's *Ode on the Burial of the Duke of Wellington*. Poetry is its own justification, and is no thing of parties or politics. And all poetry that rises into the upper air of the eternal realities, stands above all controversy, passion, or prejudice.

But when our poet descends into the arena of party polemics, in such things as 'Riflemen, Form,' 'Hands all Round,' 'The Third of February, 1852,' 'The Fleet,' and other topical pieces dear to the Jingo soul, it is not poetry but journalism. And journalists' poetry should be left to such rhymesters as those who, like the Poet Laureate of our empire, and the Poet Laureate of Tommy Atkins, fill the columns of the newspapers when the vulgar are seized with a war-fit or a scare.

But Tennyson, though much of his work is no doubt destined to be shed in the course of time, as is so much of all workers except the very greatest, has stamped his name for ever on English literature as *the* poet, the one dominant poet of the long Victorian era, and as one of the chief lyrists in the whole of our poetic roll. He is destined to share with Milton the crown of consummate mastery of poetic diction. As a poet of nature he stands beside Byron, Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth. Byron is the poet of mountains and oceans, Shelley of clouds and air, Keats of the perfume of the evening, Wordsworth of the meaning and mysteries of nature as whole. And so Tennyson is

the poet of flowers, trees, and birds. Of flowers and trees he must be held to be the supreme master, above all who have written in English, perhaps indeed in any poetry. The meanest flower that blows does not inspire in Tennyson thoughts so deep as it did to Wordsworth, but Tennyson has painted them all — flowers, wild and cultivated, trees, herbs, woods, downs, and moors — with the magic of a Turner. He spoke of trees and flowers, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that groweth on the wall. As flowers, hills, trees, and rivers uttered to Wordsworth a new moral Decalogue, so they seemed to Tennyson, as they did to Turner, radiant with a fanciful beauty which no man had seen before. If we cannot claim for Tennyson the supreme place of a poet of man's destinies, or as one of the creative masters of our literature, he has for ever clothed the softer aspects of the world of man and nature with a garment of delicate fancy and of pure light.

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